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SUBJECT: NEW FACES JOIN RUSSIA'S PUBLIC CHAMBER

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Summary

1. (SBU) When Russia's 126-member Public Chamber convenes in January, its new ranks will include two well-known human rights activists, who had been dismissive of the Public Chamber when it was first established. Civil society activists remain divided on the value of the Chamber, often concluding that it is "better than nothing." Moscow Helsinki Group's Lyudmila Alekseyeva, a strong critic has changed her stance towards the Chamber, accepting state funds in order to demonstrate that civil society is prepared to work constructively with the GOR. Despite the addition of new members, it is unlikely the Public Chamber will work aggressively to hold the government accountable, preferring instead to tinker on the margins of major social issues. End summary.

Building the Public Chamber

2. (U) The second convocation of the Public Chamber will begin in January 2008. As per the complicated nominations process, on October 1, President Putin appointed the first third of the 126 members who will serve in the Chamber, half of whom are new to the Chamber, while the others are current members. The next third will be selected by those who were appointed by the President. They will come from national civil society organizations. The final 42 members will come from regional and local organizations. They will in turn be selected by the first two-thirds. In an effort to ensure better geographical distribution, each region of Russia will be assigned a number of Public Chamber slots.

3. (SBU) According to Anatoliy Kucherena, a civil rights lawyer who has been reappointed to the Public Chamber, the selection of the second tranche will be competitive and interested members will only be considered if they have been with a civil society organization for at least a year and have results to show for their work. More than 300 people have expressed interest in joining the Public Chamber, according to Kucherena.

Changes in Membership

4. (SBU) Putin's appointees include a few serious human rights figures among a diverse group of academics, artists and economists. Notable among the new members are 1990's economic reform architect, Yevgeniy Yasin; Editor-in-Chief of the weekly "Arguments and Facts" newspaper, Nikolay Zyatkov; President of the Holocaust Foundation, Alla Gerber; and Director of the Moscow Human Rights Bureau, Aleksandr Brod. Both Yasin and Brod told us they were surprised by their nominations. Yasin's daughter Irina Yasina told us he was

grateful for the "cover" provided by serving in the Chamber and looked forward to using the forum to express his reformist views. Yasina speculated that the addition of her father, Brod and Gerber to the Chamber was part of a strategy to bring in people who have cachet with those who have questioned the legitimacy of the Chamber.

Rabbi Lazar, a current member of the Chamber who will continue to serve in the second convocation, said the addition of the two human rights activists is a positive development.

15. (SBU) Bishop Sergey Ryakhovskiy, who has been a member of the Public Chamber since its inception and will continue to serve, said he was pleased with the contingent nominated by the President. He told us he expects the Chamber to be more professional than its predecessor. Commentators noted that among those not reappointed to the Chamber were pop diva Alla Pugacheva and Olympic figure skater Irina Rodnina, who had made no pretense of toiling in the Chamber, and had declined even to attend its infrequent public sessions.

Smokescreen or Voice of the People

16. (SBU) When first established in 2005, the Public Chamber was criticized by some civil society and human rights activists as being a smokescreen to "distract the public's attention from what is a real diminishment of democracy," said independent Duma Deputy Oksana Dmitrieva at the time, who worried that the Public Chamber would "usurp parliament's role." Alekseyeva of Moscow Helsinki Group was among those who argued that the Public Chamber was "a pathetic appendage of the government." Alekseyeva further contended that some sought membership in the Public Chamber, not as a public service, but as a way of gaining credibility and legitimacy.

17. (SBU) However, in the past two years, there has been some mellowing of the criticism, with activists seeking to exploit the Chamber's limited utility. Alekseyeva reversed course and in 2007 sought a grant from a state fund set aside to support civil society.

Grants were awarded to domestic NGOs through a competitive process led by 6 NGOs selected by the Public Chamber. Moscow Helsinki Group

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(MHG) requested and received a 2.5 million ruble grant to open a public office. Alekseyeva told us that MHG did not want to fuel GOR charges that NGOs were beholden only to western governments, and sought to demonstrate civil society's readiness to work constructively with the Russian government. Other Russian human rights organizations also received grants including Memorial and For Human Rights.

18. (SBU) Vyacheslav Glazyshev, President of the Academy of Urban Environment and a current Public Chamber member who has been reappointed by the President, insisted to us that the Public Chamber has proved to be valuable. He cited one example of the chamber playing the role of "middle man" between students, who were protesting for better quality teachers, and faculty at a sociological institute. He said the Chamber was not a substitute for the Duma but an institution that was important for society given the parliament's orientation toward party interests. Kucherena told us the development of the Public Chamber was part of the long process of changing the Soviet mentality of the country. While he said at first it was difficult to work with the Duma due to lack of understanding about the role of the Public Chamber, the situation has improved. William Smirnov, executive secretary of the President's Human Rights Council, who is not affiliated with the Chamber, called it "better than nothing."

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The Public Chamber, although conceived as an institution to develop civil society, will likely remain an institution that tinkers around the edges of major social ills but does little to hold the government or administration accountable. In the two years since it was established, it has served as a forum for discussion of various issues, but these discussions have yet to include outright criticism of government or administration actions. As the Public Chamber enters its third year, its willingness to tackle

controversial issues will be the test of its value.